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21 March 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Clashes on the Sino-Soviet Border

Origins and Motives

1. Periodic disputes on the frontier between Russia and China have erupted from time to time for some three hundred years. Occasionally these disputes have led to war, but sometimes they have been settled by treaty or otherwise and lain dormant for considerable time. Until about 1960 the fraternal relations between Communist China and Soviet Russia had muted the border question, but during the last decade they have appeared again. There have been frequent minor incursions, exchanges of insults by patrols, vociferous claims and counter-claims, and in a few cases actual fighting, with casualties.

2. For several months before March 2 the Chinese were drawing public attention to provocative Soviet activity along the frontier, and they seem to have had some reason. In recent weeks,

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25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

25X1

on Chinese air space. The size and activity of ground patrols on both sides appears also to have increased, and there have been a few minor brushes between the two sides.

3. On March 2, however, occurred an encounter very much larger and bloodier than any previously known during the period of Communist rule. It seems almost certain that 31 Soviets were killed -- these were uniformed men, and included the commanding officer -- and it may be that a considerably larger number of Chinese also perished. On 14 and 15 March the fracas was renewed with even larger forces, and there have been subsequent exchanges of artillery fire. Meanwhile both sides made extensive propaganda out of the incident.

4. The facts are still far from clear. The evidence strongly suggests, however, that the Chinese fired the first shot and that the Soviets were taken by surprise. The Soviets made the first public announcement of what had occurred, but they did so without haste or emphasis. The propaganda battle followed, with each side stimulating the other to new excesses of language.

- 2 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

5. Concerning the motives behind the initiation of this affair, it may well be that the simplest explanation is the best. The island over which the fighting took place -- a worthless piece of ground in itself -- seems clearly to be within Chinese territory. The boundary is taken to run at the navigable channel in the Ussuri River, and both maps and photography show the island on the Chinese side. The Soviets had appeared on the island in some modest strength. Quite probably (we cannot prove this) Chinese local forces were ordered to drive them off. They attempted to do so, and the effort turned into a considerable affray. Enough men were killed and wounded so that each side was thoroughly aggrieved, and neither side disposed to yield or to compromise. Prestige became involved, and the immense reservoir of Sino-Soviet hostility contributed to exacerbate feelings.

6. Yet this simple explanation does not quite satisfy. It accounts well enough for the occurrence of a border fracas, but it does not quite explain why the Soviets increased their air and ground patrols at this particular time, why the Chinese reacted with such intensity to something which was, after all, not very much out of the ordinary, and above all why both sides chose to blow up the incident into a great deal of sound and fury. One has

- 3 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

an inclination to look for deeper and subtler motives on both sides. High authorities in both Moscow and Peking must have known that the local situation on the Ussuri was building up to a point where some sizable clash might occur. Neither side seems to have done anything to restrain or prevent such a clash. Both chose to pursue the immediate quarrel with vigor.

7. There are various conceivable motives, none of which can be demonstrated and none of which are very convincing. Peking might have calculated, for example, that Soviet problems in Eastern Europe and recent tensions over Berlin made it a good moment to press border claims in a more vigorous fashion, and to harass and embarrass Moscow. Or Peking may have wanted to disabuse Moscow of any notion that preoccupation with internal matters -- such as the forthcoming Ninth Party Congress -- had caused the Chinese to drop their guard on the frontier. Or, perhaps most plausibly of all, Peking thought that a well-publicized fight on the border would rally popular support against foreign devils, invigorate and unify opinion for the Party Congress, and make it easier to go forward with unpopular social programs.

. - 4 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

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25X1

25X1

8. As for Moscow, it also could expect to profit in popular opinion by engaging in a fight with the Chinese, always an enemy to arouse Russian chauvinism. Moscow might conceivably have wished for something to distract attention from its rather lame performance in the Berlin controversy over the Bundesversammlung. And it may be that the Soviets simply thought this a good opportunity to administer a chastening lesson to the Chinese, since no one can doubt that if things came to a substantial military confrontation the Chinese would lose. On the whole, however, it seems to us that the Soviets had less to gain, though not more to lose, from this affair than the Chinese.

9. We incline to the view that the incident was primarily the result of increased vigilance and aggressiveness on both sides of the border, but particularly of a Chinese decision to repel the Soviet occupation of Damansky island. Once the fighting started, neither side was willing to withdraw or subside; prestige became involved. And it may be that some of the deeper motives described above came into play, though we doubt that they provided the impetus for initiating the affair.

- 5 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

Will the Conflict be Enlarged?

10. In following up the skirmish, Peking has resurfaced the territorial dispute growing out of the "unequal" treaties of the 19th Century, called attention once again to the Soviet military buildup along the border, and charged that the "violation" of Chinese soil is another example -- like that of the occupation of Czechoslovakia -- of Moscow's "social imperialism" and of US-Soviet collusion to "encircle" China. Yet the Chinese have also injected a note of restraint by raising an old Mao refrain that they will not be the first to attack but, if attacked, will surely return the blow. Most recently, in a 17 March editorial in the authoritative Red Flag, Peking gave scant attention to the border flareup and concentrated instead on internal matters.

11. The Soviets appear disposed to place the latest encounters in the context of "provocations" and have announced that they do not intend to be "provoked" into an all-out war with the Chinese people. Soviet diplomats have gone to unusual lengths to brief high officials in several Free World capitals on the Soviet version of the first incident. And Soviet Defense Minister Grechko privately claimed [ ] that there

25X1

- 6 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

had been some 1200 incidents along the entire border in 1968 and that some of those along the Soviet-Manchurian border (but not the Soviet-Sinkiang border) had involved "bloodshed." An implication we draw from his remarks is that the Soviets do not intend to regard the current fighting in itself a casus belli, or even grounds for the complete rupture of diplomatic relations.

12. It is true that various elements of the Soviet armed forces appear to have been alerted in connection with the crisis -- we regard this as a routine military precaution. And it is also true that this sort of frontier skirmish can build up. Enthusiasms and passions get aroused, national prestige becomes at stake, and the Soviets might even conceive that this was a good occasion to administer a massive blow at the growing military capabilities and the insufferable political pretensions of the Chinese.

13. Yet a substantial escalation of military conflict seems to us unlikely. There may be further incidents of violence. But the Chinese certainly, and the Soviets almost certainly, have no rational interest in going to formal hostilities on a large scale. We believe, therefore, that the affair will be terminated before very long. Spring thaws and flooding in the Ussuri will help to bring this about.

- 7 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T

25X1

Broader Implications

14. As already remarked, we look upon this affair as essentially an episode in the history of Sino-Soviet hostility. It illustrates in conspicuous fashion how nationalist -- specifically territorial -- rivalries add to the ideological and political controversy. No doubt it worries Hanoi, lest it lead to a situation impairing the flow of material support from either the Soviet Union or China or both. But reports that the border trouble had halted rail shipments to North Vietnam have proved unfounded, and it seems unlikely that either Peking or Moscow would wish this to happen. There is little prospect that the Vietnam situation will be affected by the affair, assuming of course that it does not lead to Sino-Soviet war.

15. It is also highly unlikely that Moscow's relations with the US will be substantially affected by this latest involvement with China. The long-term threat posed by China to Russia does not go unregarded in Moscow. But the Soviet view of matters like strategic arms control, the Middle East, or Europe remain for the present basically independent of sporadic variations in the intensity of its difficulties with China.

- 8 -

T-O-P S-E-C-R-E-T



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Next 12 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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